

Civic Infrastructure

Robert Putnam, in his best-selling book “Bowling Alone,” argues that Americans are spending less time getting involved in their community, with their neighbors, and in civic organizations. The result is a concern on how to engage residents so that they feel a part of and add to the democratic fabric of the community.

That is the challenge for the Civic Infrastructure subcommittee to explore. How do we reach and engage regular citizens?

The committee might wish to explore this question in three parts: the formal statute-based government processes, an informal system to share and collect ideas and information, and an objective exploration of why residents love the services provided by their government, but distrust their government.

There is a body of information that has been collected to study how, where, when and why governments hold public hearings and collect citizen input. Copies of various reports, articles, and studies are included for the committee’s review. The questions are:

- In light of reduced public input, are there mechanisms to better engage citizens?
- How does government responsively and responsibly share the results of the collected input, and the outcomes?

Dr. Putnam, in his book titled “Better Together” and in subsequent speeches argues that we – as Americans – have to develop new ways to reach out to one another, and build “social capital.” The simplest definition of social capital comes from the renowned philosopher of modern times, Yogi Berra, when he said, “If you don’t go to someone’s funeral, they won’t come to yours.” Better yet is the “paradox of the commons,” which best explains how we oftentimes need to protect our common self-interests. That leads to the second series of questions:

- If old constructs aren’t working, what are the new constructs?
- How do we reach regular citizens?
- If not at public meetings, where do we reach regular citizens?

Thirdly, there appears a disconnect between citizen’s “love of services and hate of government.” Trust in government as a whole has been declining over the past forty years. While trust in local government ranks highest of the three levels (Federal and State are the other two), trust in local government has decreased nationwide in recent years. Simultaneously, people’s trust in their neighbors has also waned, at almost the same rate as is seen at the Federal level.

There is some body of evidence that suggests that communities with higher social capital have a greater level of trust. That’s not to say that there aren’t

issues or challenges in those communities, rather a stronger interest in working toward a common, preferred interest – perhaps a common self-interest.

There is also some discussion that how residents view their government, as seen in the “vending machine v. barn raising” article, has an influence on their perceptions. The questions:

- Why the “love/hate” disconnect?
- How do we promote real (v. synthetic) trust?
- Do residents regard government as a service or as a partner in their lives?
- Is that such a bad thing?
- Should we consider changing perceptions?